

Island Ecology

In my fifth grade science class I learned that islands account for one sixth of the earth's total land area.

"Islands, as we know," said Mrs. Snitz, "are surrounded by water."

This was true: our island, Thalassa, which languished off the coast of the Carolinas, was a place you could not leave without a ferry boat, or bridge, or twin engine plane; if you climbed a certain high dune at the center, you could see that our land did not connect with other land, that what moved around us was vivid and deep.

"Island ecosystems comprise some of the world's biodiversity hotspots," Mrs. Snitz told us, "and in response to ecological pressures, island species can become much more docile than their mainland counterparts, and may grow larger or smaller." Then, Mrs. Snitz, who sometimes favored me, said: "Hazel, would you get the lights?"

In darkness, we watched a slideshow of animals that had adapted to island life: a Pygmy Mammoth, which was a kind of miniature elephant that roamed the Channel Islands; the Komodo Dragon: a huge lizard with a tongue that darted in and out of its mouth; The Giant Moa: a strange vegetarian bird on the island of New Zealand that once stood on muscular legs and grew to be ten feet tall; we learned that animals on islands were vulnerable, more likely to go extinct.

We were lost in a strange reverie, until Mrs. Snitz turned the lights back on, and told us to open our science books to page 53, where I saw my first picture of the Dodo: a kind of flightless fat pigeon that knew no predators until Europeans came to the

island of Mauritius and then, due to its passive nature, and its inability to lift itself off the ground, it was hunted to death very rapidly by people, feral dogs, pigs, and even rats, which ate the Dodos' eggs.

"Does anyone know what the word Dodo means today?" Mrs. Snitz asked.

"Stupid?" Rex Scarborough guessed; there was a flutter of laughter.

At dinner that night I showed my sister, Beth, the picture of the Dodo looking stunned in its patch of grass, eternally lost to the past, its yellow bill pointed towards some distant horizon.

"That's so sad," she said, dipping two french fries in ketchup, "I mean, it died because it was friendly."

Our mother, Ruth, who likes to carve birds, took a look at the sketch of the Dodo and decided she might be able to fashion one from wood. Our father, Henry, who is one of Thalassa's only attorneys, asked me to read to him the passage about why animals on islands are different from animals on the mainland.

"In response to ecological pressures, animals on islands may grow more docile, or hostile, and significantly larger or smaller, than their mainland counterparts," I said, running my finger under the thick black text.

"I wonder if that applies to people too?" our father mused, adjusting his glasses, and I was not sure what he meant then, though I believe I do now; our island had human variations: adaptations based on shipwrecks and high winds and the early invention of the airplane; we had dwarves and giants, sea witches, and a kind of seal called The Sea Bishop that would tell your future if you held onto it while its shape

shifted; we had changelings, and housewives who lived one life under water, one life above; we had higher than average rates of anger and suicides, men whose boats disappeared in sea fog and were never seen again; we had children who were too wise to grow old.

After dinner, Beth and I closed my science book, and walked to our mailbox, which was shaped like a fish, where we found an invitation to Dorothy Mallicoat's birthday party: a blue envelope that gave way to something thick and engraved. We were *cordially invited* to Mallicoat's Fishing Pier for an evening of fishing and frivolity; our mother taped the invitation above our enormous yellow telephone so we would not forget. Ruth had trouble with birthday parties, gift wrapping, thank you notes; she was inherently bored by these feminine activities, and naturally disorganized, so that Beth and I often arrived late to parties with gifts that looked as if they had been wrapped in kleenex; sometimes the sticky, orange price tag still clung to them, and the recipient could tell we had bought the board game or Barbie on sale.

"Does Dorothy Mallicoat's father own Mallicoat's Fishing Pier?" I asked my father.

"Yes, Hazel," my father said; he was at his desk, reading a giant volume called *Practical Real Estate Law*.

"I didn't know Dorothy's dad had a job," Beth said.

"I know," I said.

"What made you think he was unemployed?" our mother asked.

"He's always home when we come over to play," Beth said, "and he yells."

"He's probably experiencing stress," our father suggested; he placed a rubber

band over his fingers and shot it into a garbage can.

"From running a fishing pier?" I asked.

There were a lot of angry men on our island: their faces red from wind and sun, their abdomens too large for their pants; Beth and I had one of the only docile varieties of father in our neighborhood: ours was bookish, and reserved but, when we visited our friends' cottages, there was an aura of dread around the hour when husbands were expected home from work; women went around hushing children and cleaning up messes; supper was carefully tended.

Billy Mallicoat was one of the angriest fathers on a peninsula of angry fathers; our dinners with Dorothy and her brothers were stiff, silent affairs during which we listened to the sound of our own knives and forks scraping against our plates; we heard the ice in our glasses and the clatter of cups settling into their saucers. Dorothy taught Beth and me, early on, to sit quietly and spill nothing. Still, sometimes something went wrong: the baby knocked over his glass of milk, or the cat hopped on the table, and Mr. Mallicoat's neck turned purple, and he nearly burst out of his shirt, his wrath like the hurricanes or nor'easters that rattled our windows.

At school, the next day, there was an assembly and the nurses were dispatched. Once a month, our elementary school population was treated to lessons on health, safety, or hygiene; the nurses were a brigade of women in white, and two of them were as tall as men, with breasts so formidable they resembled chickens. These nurses, Anna and Abigail, were twins, and they were both Quinns: descended from a

family of oversized women who lived on the north side of Thalassa. There were many generations of Quinns; several had gone to school with our Grandma Hawthorne, and their children had gone to school with our mother and father, and one of their descendants, Willa, was in Beth's class. The odd thing about these women, apart from their size and efficiency, (two ran Thalassa's libraries and banks and one ran the county clerk's office where our father filed papers and he said she was one of the smartest women he knew) was that they never married, and they appeared to have no males in their households, yet they continued to breed. Beth and I heard our parents guess about how this transpired, in their bedroom, when they thought we couldn't hear.

This month's assembly was about scoliosis, and the Quinns held up a plastic model of the spine so we could see how our own backbones were formed; they showed us a movie in which people grew hunched and crooked.

"Scoliosis is a curvature of the spine," Abigail explained to us, when the movie began to spit and turn white, "and today we're going to take a look at how everyone's spine is growing."

This was how many of these assemblies concluded: after the one about lice, for instance, we returned to our classrooms, where volunteer mothers searched our hair with chopsticks; after the one on deafness our teachers coaxed us to wear headphones and raise our hands if we heard a series of increasingly faint beeps.

On this day, the Quinns themselves visited Mrs. Snitz's class and had each of us bend forward, over our desks, their big hands tracing the path of our spines. I passed this test but, an hour later, when the Quinns were in Beth's room, across the hall, Beth

did not. I knew because our mother came to pick us up early, from the nurse's office, where Beth had been crying. I was called away, by a voice over the loud speaker, in the middle of a lesson about how coastlines are either emerging or submerging.

"I'm going to grow into a monster," Beth told our mother in the car, hair sticking to her tear-stained face.

"Mrs. Quinn says you have a mild case," our mother said.

"You should have seen this movie they showed us," I said to our mother, "It was frightening."

"I'm going to have to wear some kind of big, ugly brace," Beth said, and her tears began again: hot and miserable; she rolled her window down and sank into her seat.

"I'll take you to the doctor," our mother said.

"They'll make me take off my clothes," Beth said, and she was inconsolable.

On our porch, that evening, I was sitting in a rocking chair, with a neighborhood cat in my lap, when I saw my mother's flock of wooden Dodo birds; they were extinct yet, under my mother's carving knife, they had risen again on big, inelegant feet. Ruth was an art major in college and she carved decoys for the duck hunters of Thalassa; she also carved sea creatures for Beth and me: turtles, swordfish, crabs with their claws lifted into some fierce defiance. These Dodos, though, were my favorite; you could tell they had been kind and unsuspecting, that they would have stood motionless, like this, trusting their predators.

Beth came out and sat in the rocking chair beside mine; she'd had a shower

and quit crying but her eyes were still fragile, as if they were made of glass. She picked up one of the Dodo birds, held it in her lap.

I went alone to Dorothy Mallicoat's birthday party because Beth had a doctor's appointment. My father drove me along the beach road where at high tide, in wind, the ocean drifted into the street; we passed my father's favorite cottage, Pelican's Perch, which stood entirely in the sea several times a day on strong, thin legs; it was a cottage that should have slid away during hurricanes yet, unexpectedly, it remained: wild and civilized, its staircase descending into depths.

I was the last one to arrive, but my gift was better than usual, because my father had bought it -- a great, pink Barbie car -- and it was tucked in a presentable, decorated bag. Dorothy's mother played games with a dozen of us on the beach: we had a sand contest in which we competed to sculpt the best shark; we made our own candles and tie dyed t-shirts by dipping white shirts in warm buckets of color; then, we were invited to climb upstairs and cast fishing lines with Mr. Mallicoat. I could tell Dorothy was worried by this last activity, which was optional, and meant to keep us busy until our parents arrived.

Mr. Mallicoat waited at the end of the pier, where he had lined up a dozen poles, and he began by teaching some of the smaller boys to cast into the surf: both hands on the rod, their line released while they flung it towards the sea. At first, the girls didn't participate; we sat on benches, looking out at the surf; we compared t-shirts and emptied the contents of little gift bags into our laps. Then, Judy Tillett decided the fishing looked like fun, and she stood up just when Rex Scarborough flung his fishing

rod behind him, and his hook caught in her ear and she and Mr. Mallicoat began to scream simultaneously; Mr. Mallicoat told Rex that he was a Dodo, and then he used other words some of us had never heard before, while Judy held onto her ear, which began to drip blood in deep crimson drops onto the fishing pier. Dorothy was embarrassed, and frightened, and she seemed to disappear like some of the island animals I'd been reading about: the Pigfooted Bandicoot, Stellar's Sea Cow, Carolina Parakeets which once darkened the skies.

My parents arrived, and, by that time, Willa Quinn's mother, Anna, had taken the hook out of Judy's ear, and wrapped it in a gauze bandage, and Mrs. Mallicoat had served everyone an oversized piece of cake; Mr. Mallicoat went away to an office inside the pier, so that his wife could restore order and good cheer, and he reminded me of a whale, after surfacing, and blowing water, disappearing into the sea.

"You missed one of Mr. Mallicoat's eruptions," I told Beth when I got into the backseat with her.

"I don't have to wear a brace," Beth said; she was licking a lollipop.

"Rex got his fishing hook caught in Judy's ear," I said.

"I don't really have scoliosis," Beth said, "just bad posture."

The nurses came again, one month later, to talk to us about how our houses might catch on fire, in the middle of the night, while we were wrapped in our blankets, floating through the landscape of our dreams. Anna and Abigail Quinn showed us how we should all have smoke alarms, hung on every floor of our houses, and how we should have a plan to meet our families in our yards, so we could find each other when

we made our escapes. Then, we learned that it wasn't the fire itself that was most likely to kill us, but the smoke that drifted like fog through our rooms, and would leave us as breathless as fish plucked from the ocean. The Quinns showed us what to do if our clothes caught on fire; we were to stop, drop, and roll; they showed us how to snuff out flames by depriving them of oxygen.

Mr. Mallicoat killed himself on a Tuesday; I remember because, in Mrs. Snitz's class, we were discussing a kind of miniature horse that ran wild on our island: the size of a dog, with a white tail that matched the ocean's breaking waves. Then, a voice came over the loudspeaker, and Dorothy Mallicoat was called to the principal's office, and, when she returned, her face was naked; she was attended by Anna Quinn, who helped her place all her books in her backpack; Mrs. Quinn handed a piece of paper to Mrs. Snitz, who sneezed three times while reading it, then dabbed her eyes.

"Class," she said, once Dorothy Mallicoat had been ushered down the polished hallways, Anna Quinn's big hand on her shoulder, "the Mallicoats have experienced a tragedy today that your parents will explain to you later; I will rely on all of you to help Dorothy in the days ahead."

In the evening, our mother burned a roast, and our father sat, for a time, clearing his throat.

"What happened to the Mallicoats?" Beth asked.

"Mr. Mallicoat was feeling depressed," our father began.

"I thought he was feeling angry," I said.

"Sometimes sadness can look like anger," our father said.

I thought of Mr. Mallicoat, standing up, his face a constellation of bursting blood vessels, to swat a cat that had landed on the kitchen table; I thought of him throwing the baby's glass of half-spilled milk against a wall.

"Mr. Mallicoat took his own life," our father said, rearranging his silverware.

"How?" Beth asked.

"He drowned," our father said.

Beth and I read about it later: how Mr. Mallicoat walked to the end of his fishing pier, with stones in his pockets, and three fishermen watching, and threw himself into the ocean with the sharks, and jellyfish, and the remains of shipwrecks, with the gulf stream, and the messages in bottles, and the pregnant sea turtles searching for the exact piece of beach where they were once born.

The fishermen called the coastguard, who came on a boat with divers, but Mr. Mallicoat was breathless by that time, his face blue instead of red; Beth and I tried to decide how we would feel about it if we were Dorothy: sad, of course, but wouldn't she also be relieved? We thought of the dinners at her house: the scraping of silverware against plates, the dangerous silence. We heard our father tell our mother, in low tones, how Mr. Mallicoat had been having some health problems, how he had called the office recently to draw up a new Will.

Our family went to the funeral, and our mother kissed the head of the baby Mallicoat, and the face of Mrs. Mallicoat, which seemed partially washed away by tears. Dorothy would not look at Beth and me and, for the rest of the year.

There was a storm, from the northeast, the day after the funeral, and the tide

was too high for school buses to pass in certain fishing villages, so school was cancelled. This same nor'easter blew our mother's Dodos into the canal behind our house and, before we could rescue them, the wind caught their big, flightless bodies, and carried them out of sight: into the Albemarle Sound, then into the ocean itself, where, I imagined, they were benevolent and unprepared: their bills smiling at sharks.

When we returned to school, the nurses talked to us about how to survive Rip Tides; we learned that Rip Tides are the rivers of the ocean, and that we should not swim against them; then, we pretended to swim parallel to shore in the school gymnasium, with Anna and Abigail Quinn moving arm over arm before us, through the imaginary depths of our lives, which were entirely surrounded by water.

